

THE
PARACHUTE WARD

ALSO BY BRIAN JEFFREY STREET

Invasions Without Tears:
*The Story of Canada's Top-Scoring Spitfire Wing
in Europe during the Second World War*
(co-author)

Champagne Navy:
*Canada's Small Boat Raiders
of the Second World War*
(co-author)

THE
PARACHUTE
WARD

*A Canadian Surgeon's
Wartime Adventures in Yugoslavia*

BRIAN JEFFREY STREET

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DOG SLED DOCTOR

IN JUNE 1936, Dafoe and his four friends from his graduating class at Queen's set out for New Brunswick to take up a six-month Junior Rotating Scholarship at Saint John General Hospital. Typically, they travelled in style—jammed into an Auburn touring car they had purchased for \$100 from a student in Kingston. Dafoe's share came from a \$50 prize he had won in an essay contest with the topic "Advantages of an Annual Medical Exam." Among the car's many attractions—according to Dafoe—was that it would accommodate twelve nurses.

Still, Dafoe's experiences in Saint John were apparently less robust than those in Kingston. And certainly they paled in comparison with events on the world's stage, as Hitler reclaimed the Rhineland for Nazi Germany, Mussolini defeated the Lion of Judah in Ethiopia, Franco became embroiled in the Spanish Civil War, and King Edward VII abdicated. It was a good year for the newspapers.

In Saint John, Dafoe and his friends had to contend with unrest of a different sort: an ongoing conflict with the superintendent at the hospital. "He thought we should be treated as soldiers," McNichol fumed. Frank Earle concurred: "The superintendent was a miserable fellow who made life unpleasant for all of us." Dafoe and his friends often complained and felt persecuted as a result—"although we were pretty incorrigible at times, too," Earle admitted.

Earle recalled one incident among many. On Christmas Eve in 1936 several of them had gathered around the switchboard to chat with the nurses.

“Suddenly I heard singing somewhere, loud and then soft,” said Earle. Its origin mystified them but it was finally tracked down. “Colin had got sauced up on rum or something and was riding up and down the elevator, singing ‘Jingle Bells’—and sometimes ‘Jingle Balls’—while playing a ukelele.”

The impromptu recital lasted twenty minutes or more, but soon passed into the Dafoe mythology.

For the most part, however, Dafoe seemed a serious student in Saint John. He lived at the hospital and shared rooms with his friends. The six-month rotating scholarship involved periods of study and practice in various disciplines, including emergency treatment, obstetrics, and gynaecology. And it was in Saint John that he met Charlotte Savery Small, a remarkable young brunette with grey-blue eyes. If it was not love at first sight, there was certainly mutual interest.

Charlotte Small was born in Chengtu, capital of the province of Szechwan in western China, in 1912. Her parents, the Reverend and Mrs Walter Small, had been missionaries with the West China Union University since 1908 and would remain in China almost without interruption for forty-two years.

Charlotte had lived with her parents in Chengtu until she was fourteen, then travelled to England and stayed with an aunt and uncle in Portsmouth for two and a half years. She then moved to Vancouver and in 1929, just two months before her seventeenth birthday, she enrolled in the first-year arts program at the University of British Columbia. A year later she decided to switch to medicine and moved again, to study at the University of Toronto. Having graduated, she was now in Saint John to finish her internship, again staying with relatives. Like Dafoe at the time, her main interest was obstetrics and gynaecology.

Charlotte recognized in Colin Dafoe a man with a rebel spirit, a good sense of humour, and an engaging zest for life—qualities she found particularly refreshing. She enjoyed her association with Dafoe’s friends, too, and often played baseball with the men, dressed up for the event in trousers borrowed from Reg Patterson.

Yet Charlotte had only one “date” with Dafoe—to go swimming. She was somewhat surprised one day to find him hovering over her shoulder as she was taking a patient’s history. He had made a point of finding her, he explained. He was leaving Saint John and wanted to say farewell. Several weeks later, Charlotte received a letter from him, postmarked Edmonton. He

wanted to keep in touch, he said, and asked if she would mind. Charlotte replied at once that she would be very pleased if he wrote.

Colin was in Edmonton as a result of a strange combination of circumstances. He had been accepted for post-graduate studies in obstetrics and gynaecology at McGill University in Montreal. However, he received a letter from some Queen's friends who had graduated in engineering and gone to run mining camps in the North. They needed a doctor, they explained. Would Dafoe help? He accepted the offer with enthusiasm, opting for the chance of travel and excitement rather than further study, and was in Edmonton, en route to the North.

Of his close friends, Frank Earle had already embarked on a similar adventure, a posting with a gold mine on the Sachigo River, some eight hundred kilometres north of Sioux Lookout, Ontario, while John McNichol had gone to St John's General Hospital in Brooklyn, New York, on a three-year general rotating internship. Gerry Graham and Reg Patterson had moved on, too.

In January 1937, Dafoe left Edmonton for northern Saskatchewan, in a small bushplane crammed with supplies. At twenty-eight, he would find living as a "dog sled doctor" the grandest adventure yet in his young life.

He spent the first five months working with the Fond du Lac Syndicate at the east end of Lake Athabasca. Then he moved to the Athona Mines project in Goldfields, assuming sole responsibility for the care of the mine's sixty-five employees and fifteen families in addition to the inhabitants of several outlying communities. He designed a compact, eight-bed hospital in Goldfields and ran it alone, handling everything from mining injuries to obstetrics. He even devised a small still to produce intravenous fluids often urgently required.

The days were long and hard. But J C Byrne, who managed Athona Mines from 1936 to 1939, recalled that Dafoe worked tirelessly, seeming to revel in even the most herculean tasks. He had adapted quickly to the harsh environment, and seemed a first-class canoeist as well as an excellent hockey player who helped the Athona team to retain its regional championship.

For his part, Dafoe was struck by the rugged landscapes and many original characters he met in the North. He took a special interest in the welfare of the Indian and Inuit communities around Fond du Lac and Stony Rapids, to the point that he was outraged by the lack of government aid to the settlements. Not surprisingly, he was equally appalled by incidents of mismanagement.

According to Father J L Riou, who was a member of a mission in Fond du Lac, Dafoe travelled day and night by dog sled to treat his patients. “Mr Colin Dafoe was so kind, so good for the poor Indians,” Riou stated, “and I am sure that he saved from death a few of them.”

Not only was Dafoe’s independent spirit given an enormous boost as a result of this adventure, but it was at this time that he discovered Robert Service’s poem, “The Men That Don’t Fit In,” which he took as his lifelong creed:

There’s a race of men that don’t fit in,
A race that can’t stay still;
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,
And they roam the world at will.
They range the field and they rove the flood,
And they climb the mountain’s crest;
Theirs is the curse of the gipsy blood,
And they don’t know how to rest.

Dafoe found something in Service’s words that articulated what had driven him for years—a restless, wandering spirit; the need to roam and explore; an adventurer’s love of the great outdoors.

Perhaps he saw something prophetic in them, too. In any event, he recited the first stanza of the poem and half of the second whenever he wanted to cajole someone into doing something, when he felt stalled himself, or when he felt sentimental, at a loss for words, or just plain high-spirited:

If they just went straight they might go far;
They are strong and brave and true;
But they’re always tired of the things that are,
And they want the strange and new.

If Colin Scott Dafoe, at the age of twenty-eight, saw himself somewhat romantically as one of “The Men That Don’t Fit In,” he was meanwhile courting Charlotte Small by mail. Charlotte had remained in Saint John through June 1937, and had then gone to Toronto, where she took up a residency at Women’s College Hospital. When Dafoe finally left Goldfields in February 1938, after a little more than a year as a “dog sled doctor,” he

visited Charlotte before going on to a brief posting at Kingston General Hospital.

He was in Toronto again on April 9, 1938. At 3:00 p.m. that day, Colin Scott Dafoe and Charlotte Savery Small were married at Trinity United Church. Reverends G O Fallis and Walter Small (in Canada for his daughter's wedding) officiated. Dafoe borrowed his father's car so that he and Charlotte could drive to New York on their honeymoon.

By August 1938, the newlyweds were in Ottawa, where Charlotte found work with the Children's Hospital while Colin resumed his internship, this time at the Salvation Army's Grace General Hospital on Wellington Street. Frank Earle, also recently returned from the North, somehow managed to get Dafoe to tag along with him to try out with the Ottawa Rough Riders. They practised briefly with the team but soon dropped out, claiming it put too much strain on their studies. In fact, both men had been investigating the possibility of going on to do post-graduate work in London or Edinburgh. Surprisingly, Dafoe had been cool to the idea at first, but Charlotte had been persuasive. Though Dafoe claimed to have had enough of the English after an exasperating experience with an anatomy professor at Queen's, Charlotte's arguments eventually won him over.

On November 11, 1938 they sailed from Montreal, landing in Southampton in the cold drizzle of late autumn. In London, Dafoe was further disheartened to see sandbags and slit trenches around Hyde Park. The world—and England in particular—was watching the growing troubles in Czechoslovakia with great apprehension.

Almost upon arrival, the Dafoes were asked to sign documents declaring their intention to stay in England to serve in the Civilian Emergency Medical Service in the event of war. Only Dafoe signed. "He'd do anything that seemed adventurous," Charlotte explained.

Once signed, the document was quickly forgotten in the flurry to find work. The Dafoes had left Canada almost penniless. Charlotte was fortunate in finding a job as an anaesthetist in a London teaching hospital, though she later discovered that she had been the only applicant. Meanwhile, Dafoe grew more frustrated as the months went by and numerous applications and interviews brought no appointment. Eventually he took on assignments filling in for doctors on holiday. He enjoyed this work immensely, as it meant travelling to different parts of the country.

But Dafoe remained unsettled. He considered long-term assignments in Afghanistan, as well as openings with the Colonial Medical Service in India and the Falkland Islands. Charlotte, unenthusiastic about quitting England, nevertheless said she would do so if Colin insisted. The matter seemed to be resolved when he obtained a position as a house surgeon with a London County Council hospital, St Alfege's. Though he had not yet completed his internship, his eighteen months in general practice apparently satisfied the board.

Then, on February 14, 1940, Colin Scott Dafoe was "granted" an emergency commission as lieutenant in the Royal Army Medical Corps. The war in Europe had started six months before—and the document Dafoe had signed upon landing in England had meanwhile surfaced from some departmental file.

From February to early May of 1940, Dafoe was attached to No 4 Royal Army Service Corps Training Depot in Margate, Kent. Normally a busy seaside resort, Margate was out of bounds to tourists in the spring of 1940, and had become a deserted and strangely silent spot.

Charlotte did manage to visit her husband in early April that year, during the Easter holidays. They spent many hours strolling along the deserted beaches, now clogged with wire and gun emplacements. On Easter Sunday, they attended a service at Canterbury Cathedral, accompanied by Charlotte's aunt from Portsmouth. If Dafoe was suitably impressed by the architecture of the cathedral and the city itself, Charlotte recalls "he probably went more for the change of scenery and the chance to get his hands on a military vehicle for the day."

Some time that spring, Dafoe saw duty in France as an acting medical officer stationed in Brittany, but the details are not fully known. The next official record concerning Dafoe finds him posted on May 7, 1940 to the military hospital at Budbrooke Barracks in Warwickshire. During the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk between May 26 and June 2, Dafoe was in Southampton again, sorting out wounded as they landed, providing emergency medical treatment and sending them along for further care as needed. Charlotte had been evacuated from London to work for the Civilian Emergency Medical Service in the countryside. As it happened, the service treated many of the wounded that Colin Dafoe had first examined in Southampton.

Dafoe soon returned to Warwickshire, resuming his duties with the military hospital there. Charlotte joined him again for a holiday of several weeks, as she had stopped working by then and was preparing, at his insistence, to return to Canada. It was the summer of the Battle of Britain.

In the time they had left together, the Dafoes toured Warwickshire by bicycle. They ventured as far as Oxford, too, and Stratford-upon-Avon.

Then, in July, Charlotte sailed back to Canada, taking with her two small boys, the children of good friends in Kenilworth. She returned to Toronto to complete a year of research in anaesthesiology, and then moved to Belleville where she would spend five years in general practice.

She always regretted leaving her husband in England, especially since the area where she had worked escaped the war untouched. Moreover, the only news Charlotte received from him in those days would arrive in short letters and even shorter telegrams, carrying such messages as: "Fit and well, love Colin."

The letters and telegrams came from many different places, too—because, for the next few years, Colin moved around a lot.